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ABSTRACT

Those wishing to teach Chicano literature face many obstacles: administrative indifference or hostility, cutbacks in courses perceived as "academic luxuries," and pragmatism of students who see Chicano literature courses as too esoteric. Acceptance as an integral part of the regular curriculum is still at stake. Chicano literature exists marginally in academic contexts and has to justify its usefulness as a viable field to teach and study. Some teachers claim students feel intimidated by the unsettling issues Chicano courses frequently raise. However, students can experience social history and a writer's perspective on life from a Chicano point of view through this literatue. Since pedagogically sound courses last longer and are harder to eliminate from the curriculum, teachers should organize courses in an efficient manner. Teachers of Chicano literature courses should provide a syllabus, go over literary terms to be used, integrate lectures with student involvement, provide a detailed history of Chicano literature, use visual aids, give students a library tour (to acquaint them with facilities and encourage them to do research), hand out specific guidelines on writing research papers, invite authors to lecture to the class, encourage after-class student participation, and, before exams, furnish students with an outline of material covered. (MH)

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Teaching Chicano Literature: Changing Tides and Challenges

By

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Teaching Chicano Literature: Changing Tides and Challenges

The teaching of Chicano literature at any level falls under the category of a personal enterprise carried out by a small number of instructors who up to the present time have not turned it into a field of research. Only a handful have expressed concern for the pedagogical aspect of such a discipline, often in the form of reading lists and syllabi or thematic suggestions. Without a network to disseminate information on methodology and approach, the instructors have to rely heavily on their creativity and interest, two key elements which result confined by local resources and support. As is true with most other literatures, the mechanics of how to teach Chicano literature has yet to become a topic of discussion. Whereas much progress has occurred in terms of bibliographical resources, not to mention the wide variety of existent works, almost no guidelines are available to structure provocative class sessions. The question still remains, especially for neophytes in the field: How does one go about organizing a course in Chicano literature? A thorough response to this concern could enhance the formulation of strategies for future teachers. Given that there already exists a sizeable body of teachers in the field, it seems imperative to eventually address the problem on how to develop pedagogical techniques and skills with which to teach Chicano literature more effectively. A forum could be established to discuss such questions as educational institutions and how they emit policies unreceptive to Chicano needs. In other words, new proposals could be considered in order to im-

plement curricula changes.

When compared to the typical academic discipline or field of study, the teaching of Chicano literature--or for that matter, Chicano Studies--is indeed unique. Although most of us would probably agree with such a statement, a current trend is emerging in numerous universities which already offer these courses as part of the regular curriculum. That is, the teaching of the literature is not increasing at the rate in which the criticism is having an impact. Quite the contrary, these courses are generally received--aside from students--with attitudes that range from indifference to outright assaults. The puzzling situation is quickly becoming a matter of urgency in various universities, particularly in those which are dismantling entire departments or programs with the rationale to trim administrative costs and reduce academic luxuries. The result involves a marked decrease of Chicano courses nationally at the same time that a pragmatic mentality sets in among students, thereby sidestepping literature because they view it as too esoteric. The present situation and status of Chicano literature courses merit some reflection in order to counteract the mentioned trend by putting forward a plan of pedagogically structured courses. My main objective here is to outline the obstacles that pertain directly to the teaching of Chicano literature, reevaluate the goals and offer some suggestions vis-à-vis the changing tides and challenges.

The study of Chicano literature is now an undeniable fact, a field autonomous from any other and sometimes related to American and Latin American literatures. As a separate dis-

cipline, largely sponsored and promoted by Chicano literary journals, its acceptance as an integral part of the regular curriculum is still at stake. This battleground aims to become the next frontier if the literature is to receive a steady flow of patronage from future students. Currently, few universities offer introductory courses at the undergraduate level and even fewer allow graduate work in this area. Parenthesis: high school courses on Chicano literature are virtually nonexistent and junior colleges almost find themselves in a similar situation. When courses are offered, the selection is usually minimal and often stigmatized by patronizing attitudes. Worse yet, they consistently become categorized as non-essential classes, much like appendages that piggy-back on established literature courses. Rarely are they treated as necessary components of the students' educational package by making an honest effort to integrate Chicano literature into the general area of literature. Allowing the student to probe into ethnic modes of expression in contrast to mainstream literary traditions has not yet become a central focus of education. Chicano literature, consequently, exists marginally in the aforementioned context, having to justify its usefulness and place as a viable field to teach and study. It is inevitable that the added scrutiny and incredulous attitudes tend to exacerbate the prospective success of such courses. Because of being watched under the microscope, a self-fulfilling prophecy tends to be instilled to block their success. Needless to say, other courses receive less monitoring at the same time that expectations are not set so high.

What is at the bottom of the impending situation herein described? We offer two succinct explanations: an unwillingness to embrace Chicano literature as an independent discipline and the overriding ignorance on the part of the academicians who are unreceptive to change. A lack of curiosity or perhaps over specialization in a given area contribute to their disinterest, thus ignoring the feasibility to expand literature departments into more diversified offerings. If the obstacles seem difficult to overcome, their effects are visibly more damaging. For example, the literature's acceptance remains tabled or filibustered by platitudes and intellectual myopia; students' interests never become fully developed by gearing them elsewhere; less FTE is sought for permanent instructors; library facilities and resources acquire a low priority; graduate students are faced with the dilema of having to fend for themselves; prospective teachers of this literature are therefore compelled to specialize in Chicano literature as a side interest, thus requiring double preparation in one traditional area plus Chicano literature; and so forth. In other words, every conceivable pretext is used to discourage an involvement in this literature as if to imply that it represents a poor investment.

In light of the mentioned onslaught of obstacles and the bleak outlook, it might be worthwhile to reassess the initial idealism inherent in the early phases of the Chicano literary movement in the 1960s that sought to make literature a tool with which to make an unequivocal imprint on those for the good of change. Literature <u>then</u> was expected to spark rapid transformations on social structures and value systems that

took decades to develop, and their entrenchment was somehow not viewed as an insurmountable obstacle, but rather a welcoming challenge. After all, we formed part of a Movement which designated itself as a Renaissance first and a "Florecimiento" later, marking the coming of a new epoch with high demands, such as justice, true egalitarianism, institutional accountability, cultural pluralism, etc. The immediate goal, and the most concrete, involved a movement to put Mexicans on the map. With this accomplished to some degree, it was believed Chicano literature would seduce and conquer thousands of readers, especially Chicanos. A few years later, we now perceive the consequences of not having institutionalized such courses at all levels because the current trend is to eliminate them either slowly or abruptly. The readership that was sought has once again gone beyond our reach and the marked increase of Chicano students overall in high schools, junior colleges, and in some cases universities, does not translate into more interest in Chicano literature. Some teachers claim that the new wave of so-called non-political students feel intimidated by the unsettling issues Chicano courses frequently raise. In other cases, Chicano literature is approached as an extension of political theory in a literary construct, thus emphasizing the former over the latter. There is no doubt that literature is political in nature and oftentimes highly critical of society and its detrimental effects on Chicanos, but it might be kept in mind that literature and politics are not synonymous. Therefore, students can experience social history and a writer's perspective on life from a Chicano point of view

through this literature. Literature is not a forum with which to solve complex social issues, but rather a medium to expose them, a kind of stage without all the props. The students' vicarious experience with it permits them the occasion to extract ideas or lessons that they can apply as they see fit.

Instead of disecting the complex nature of literature, in the final portion of this brief presentation, we wish to submit specific suggestions on how to structure a course in Chicano literature. The possible utility of the suggestions depends on the particular needs of the instructor: a new teacher might best find them useful as well as an experienced teacher who wishes to fortify his/her position in the context of quickly diminishing course offerings. Our main contention is that pedagogically sound courses last longer and are more difficult to eliminate from the curricula as is happening in many institutions. In addition, our goal is that the role and function of such a course can be enhanced as a learning device and a tool for critical thinking. The central thrust of such listings will hopefully become the best defense against the obstacles and dilemmas already mentioned. If the course format is organized in an efficient manner, the results should prove fruitful: students usually relate more intimately to the material; teachers tend to feel satisfied personally by counting on active class sessions; and evaluators are inclined to value such courses as benefactors for learning. The following do not aim to be exhaustive, but only a guide to achieve a common goal:

1. By providing a syllabus, students will immediately face clear objectives, a description of course content, re-

quirements, readings and other pertinent introductory information.

2. Give a summary of the literary terms to be used as well as examples and definitions.

3. Explain the methodology to prepare students for the constant interaction instead of the traditional "I lecture-you listen" format. Alert them to the importance of their regular participation. Integrate lectures with student involvement by assigning brief topics to present in the next class session. For example, in analyzing a novel, assign 10 topics such as theme, structure, main character, women characters, historical backdrop, is it a political or psychological novel?, etc. This format can become the backbone of a dynamic class. Also, assign key articles for students to summarize in order to accustom them to critical reviews and bring in outside perspectives. Have them challenge anything and everything. In following this format, the class sessions can be turned into a tertulia atmosphere or a collective dialogue. Solicit opinions and have them substantiate their comments with the text at all times. Consequently, students tend to gain a key insight into the material and it ceases to be a mere exercise in memorization for exam questions.

4. Provide a fairly detailed literary history of the literature so as to dismiss the notion that the literature is only a recent phenomenon which supposedly emerged in 1965. Luis Leal's seminal article "Mexican American Literature: A Historical Perspective" is useful and others.

5. Maximize teaching effectiveness by utilizing visual aids such as video tapes, especially interviews, and films.
6. Early in the term give students a tour through the library to acquaint them with facilities to encourage them to do research.
7. Make a handout of specific guidelines on how to write a research paper. It is sometimes surprising to find out how many have never written a paper to investigate a given topic while integrating others' ideas with their own. Allow students to give an oral summary of their findings.
8. Invite authors to lecture to the class and promote the idea of conducting a collective interview whenever possible.
9. Encourage student participation after class among students to involve them in the subject matter. Such groups could be formed with various objectives aside from involving students in literature.
10. Before exams, furnish students with an outline of material covered to avoid surprises. If the final exam is to contain essay questions consider supplying samples or a collection from which a reduced number of questions will be chosen.

The ultimate objective is to provide variety and incorporate innovative teaching techniques to a subject matter that is little known. By making the course unforgetable and truly a learning experience, there is a greater possibility Chicano literature courses can continue to be taught and count on high enrollments, and above all, it can be an exemplary course to highlight the place of Chicano literature in educational institutions.

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